

# New Border Customs

■ **Art review:** The best works in 'inSITE94,' an exhibition of 80 installations on 37 sites from Tijuana to Escondido, address the social and the geographical in a witty way.

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT  
TIMES ART CRITIC

**T**IJUANA—Against a backdrop of the sleek, sterile plaza of the Centro Cultural, artist Marcos Ramirez has built and furnished a one-room shanty from scraps of wood and found bits of corrugated metal. The shanty is authentic to the last detail of a small black-and-white TV dimly illuminating the dusty, shabbily furnished interior.

In one small but crucial way, however, the shanty differs from the tens of thousands of identical ones clinging to hillside ravines throughout this city: Out front, in a neat display case set up for curious visitors, Ramirez presents

finely drawn architect's plans used to build the ramshackle little structure, complete with actual city building permits checked off to show that it conforms to code. This shanty isn't life; it's art.

And it is art of a particularly devastating sort, simultaneously expressing art's stunning power and its inescapable weakness, its eloquence and impotence. Ramirez (who also goes by the nickname ERRE) has counterposed the grand plaza of an officially sanctioned *centro cultural* with a stark example of the actual cultural center of the city's teeming life.

"Century 21," as this remarkable bit of sculptural real estate is stingingly titled, is one of several first-rate works

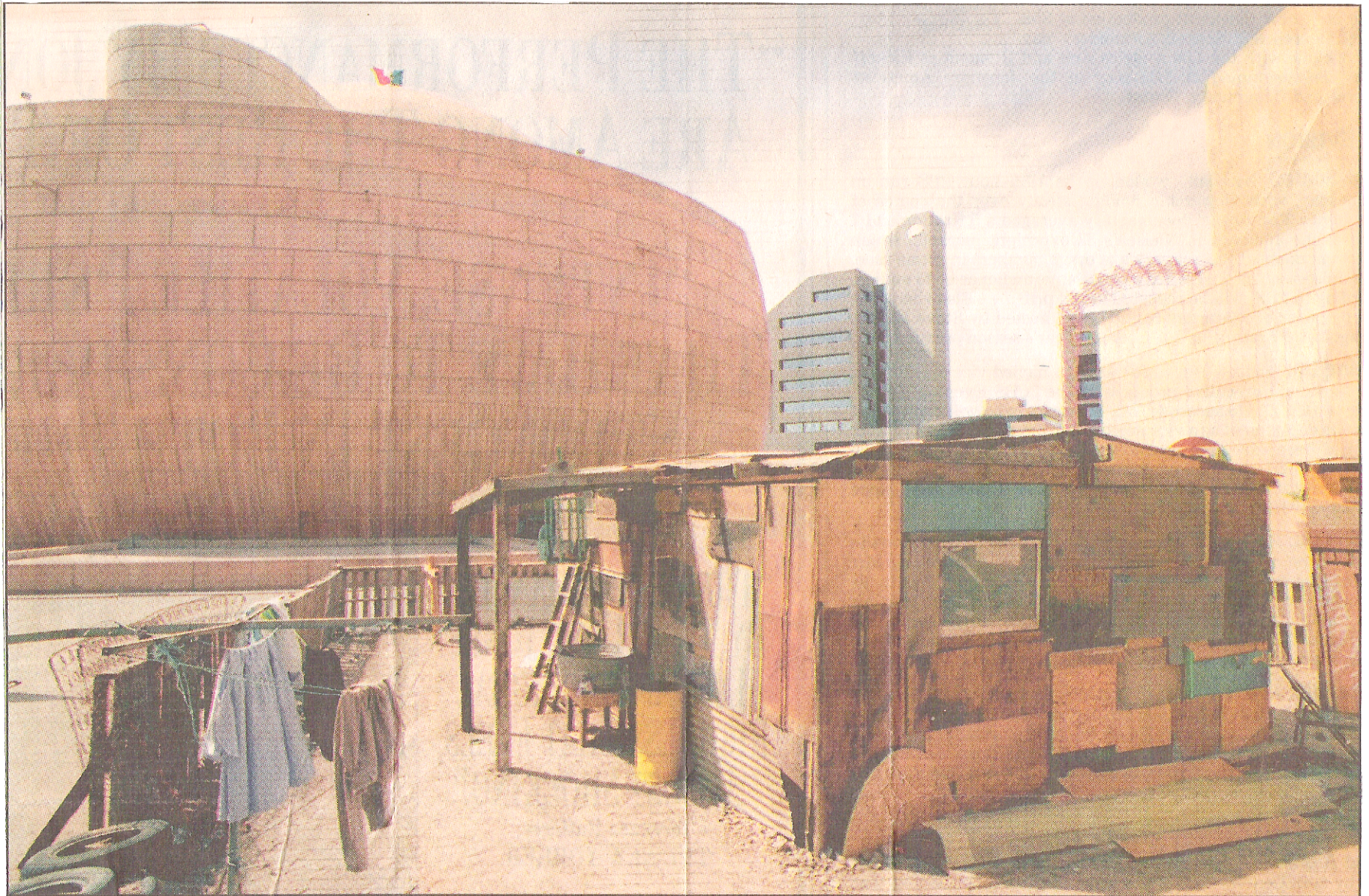
**Please see INSTALLATIONS, F8**



DAVE GATLEY / Los Angeles Times

Robert Therrien's gargantuan "Under the Table" in the Santa Fe Depot in San Diego: Your imagination starts to expand with innocent glee.





DAVE GATLEY / Los Angeles Times

Marcos Ramirez's "Century 21" in Tijuana: Counterposing the city's officially sanctioned *centro cultural* with an example of its true cultural center.



commissioned for "inSITE94," the sprawling binational exhibition of mostly site-specific art unveiled last week on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Probably too big by half, with some 80 projects in 37 locations ranging from Escondido's impressive new California Center for the Arts in North San Diego County to the sandy beaches of Tijuana, the show nonetheless possesses enough energy and ambition to warrant attention.

Festivals of installation work occur with some frequency in Europe and the United States. The genre of site-specific installation art, in which an artist creates a usually temporary ensemble or environment for a particular gallery space or outdoor site, has become ubiquitous in the past decade.

Think of installation artists as Postmodern migrant workers, arriving in town en masse to execute transient projects, then moving on to the next exhibition opportunity.

During a long weekend I saw about three-fourths of the works by visiting half the venues. "inSITE94" revolves around three hubs: downtown Tijuana, downtown San Diego and San Diego's Balboa Park. Far-flung locales—mostly college galleries—complete the event. (Some advice: If you go, spring for the \$5 guidebook, which is clearly designed and informative.) By my calculation there are six or seven top-notch works and

another dozen I'm happy to have seen; that's not a bad ratio for outings like this.

Alas, there's also a good bit of the prominent Show-and-Tell School of installation art. The subcategory recalls the junior-high-school science fair, in which a site's social or natural history is first dutifully researched, then sanctimoniously illustrated. Some "hands-across-the-border" sentimentality will be encountered too, as will some superficial political posturing.

Ramirez, who was born and lives in Tijuana, has a decidedly more intimate grasp of his site. So does Terry Allen, who has long lived in border states.

Allen's wonderfully over-the-top contribution is a mobile pair of vans, one on either side of the border fence, each topped with a platform, microphone and loudspeaker. Visitors are urged to climb up onto the traveling soapbox and bellow whatever they wish—greetings, songs, epithets, oratory—to the other side.

And they do! While making the absurdity of the fence resonate, Allen's slyly democratic work also upends the ragged cliché of visionary artists "addressing issues," transforming it into a literal mechanism for public address.

Similarly, Pepón Osorio's "Public Hearing" at San Diego's Centro Cultural de la Raza offers tabletop tableaux describing episodes of so-

cial neglect or civic brutality, and arrays them in the format of a town meeting. A table with a row of red, bomb-triggered emergency telephones decrying the race-baiting, anti-immigration proposition on the November ballot—the so-called "Save Our State" initiative, which Osorio skewers as "Same Old [Expletive]"—is accompanied by handouts on community-action efforts to fight it.

At the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, Nancy Rubins has installed one of her patented accumulations of teetering trash—this time composed of junked airplane parts, in a stark echo of the city's past military history. It begins indoors, poised on a slender steel strut, then pushes through clere-story windows to hover precariously over the plaza outdoors. It's like an industrial fungus seeking to

escape the button-downed precinct of art, and it's the best Rubins sculpture I've seen.

Across the street at the Santa Fe Depot railroad station, Robert Therrien has installed an extraordinarily beautiful ensemble of six wooden chairs around a wooden table. Lovingly handcrafted and perfectly ordinary in style, the table and chairs occupy—literally—an unused baggage room: The table must be 9 or 10 feet high and at least 15 or 20 feet long; your head just reaches the seats of the gargantuan chairs.

Two chairs are neatly tucked in, four are slightly askew, as if their huge occupants had just left the room. Under the table—as the sculpture is slyly titled—transactions occur: Your imagination starts to expand with innocent glee.

Nearby, Johnny Coleman taps the poetic potential of the depot's musty old baggage office, broad-

casting reminiscences by passengers and retired porters through discreetly placed speakers. Coleman has added a few subtly evocative elements, such as a cluster of suspenders hanging in a corner. In the most effective gesture, he has covered the floor with several inches of moist sand; the earth seems quietly to reclaim the old building, while visitors' footprints pile up, erasing one another.

In another wittily concise consideration of the border, Diego Gutiérrez Coppe has laid a toy train track in a divided room inside an old Tijuana school building. A small armadillo-like car rides the rails from one end to the next, only to be stopped by the wall dividing the room, then pausing and going back the way it came. The vehicle is gently relentless in its always determined, always thwarted journey.

Coordinated by San Diego's non-profit Installation Gallery, together with the MCA and the Centro Cultural Tijuana, "inSITE94" suffers somewhat from an ad hoc, by-committee feeling. Every institution for miles around, simply by virtue of its status as an art organization, was invited to participate, and each one chose its own show. (Inevitably, some tacked an "inSITE94" logo onto whatever happened to be scheduled.)

The thought of one big, happy, institutionalized art family straddling two nations can make you gulp. Mostly, it makes you think of fund-raising schemes.

Still, this is an event of evident potential. It could benefit from a savvy curatorial voice.

■ "inSITE94" continues through October. Information and guidebooks: (619) 544-1452.